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## A CLEVER WORK OF ART

### "A FRENCH PEASANT FAMILY" BY L'HERMITTE

(See opposite page)

NOW let us look at a similar subject in modern life, painted by a modern Frenchman, by L'hermitte, showing a French peasant family, see page 230. This family is also holy. All families are holy in which husband and wife labor to raise a family in purity and love so as to endow the race with splendid specimens of children to grow up to bless the race as much as in them lies and their environment permits. But while this picture is exceedingly clever and a sane modern work, it is only *clever*. Why? Because it lacks the lifting *style* in its composition and its conception. In fact it is scarcely at all composed, as we understand the word composition. It is apparently such a clipped-off particle of peasant life as any one could observe in some village of France. Hence the work does not exalt one above the common-place truth of nature and experience. It is nature, it is true. But Raphael's "Holy Family" is nature, plus exalting poetry. Instead of a lifting *style* L'hermitte sought only an individual *manner* of putting on paint, over and above the other qualities which the picture certainly possesses.

If the reader will look closely he will notice little dabs and streaks of paint all over the canvas as if the surface had been cross-hatched. He will find angularity in details where he should find flowing lines. He will find on the faces a lack of that effacing of the means by which an end is produced of which Whistler—a more advanced modernist than L'hermitte himself—so truthfully speaks. The reader will also notice that while there is considerable completeness of expression, above all in the mother's face, there is yet a certain lack of profundity of expression, because the expression is *obscured* by the small dabs and streaks of pigment purposely allowed to remain upon the surface of the faces, as if the artist had been above all intent on showing how he could skilfully ping-pong with pigment, and in so peculiar and personal a way, that the work should be recognized as his painting, having his trade-mark of craftsmanship. One would say he was more intent upon this than he

was on making each face completely expressive—so as to emotion the beholder profoundly. He appears to have been more intent upon astonishing our mind with his painter skill than with the stirring of the emotions of our soul. In other words, here we have common-placeness as to conception and composition, of style, but uncommon-placeness of technique, of manner, of painting.

This obtuseness of a trivial technical manner into a picture to the detriment of the expression, not only on the faces but throughout the canvas, is what we call a worse than useless ping-ponging of paint. It is true that this useless imposition of pigment upon the canvas has not been carried to an extreme point, L'hermitte being of the transition period between Rational and Modernistic art. His ping-ponging of paint has not yet become offensively excessive.

Therefore notwithstanding his annoying manner this picture is yet full of a certain spiritual charm. The types are not vulgar peasant types. The father is a sturdy, even handsome fellow; the mother is truly beautiful in profile and the little child in the crib lovely enough to warrant the affection of the whole family. The expression on the mother's face is particularly fine. But the point is, given the fine drawing in the picture, that had L'hermitte suppressed his mannerism and painted more smoothly, either like Holbein, Rembrandt or Velasquez, he would have made every inch of his canvas more expressive and emotion-stirring. In other words, had he restrained this desire for parading a technical peculiarity his picture, even though it is charming, would be more poetic than it is and a greater work of art and more charming, while now it is a surprising and clever work of art, only next door to the great.

Of course a clever work of art, we repeat, is already deserving of much honor. But how much better to suppress all technical stunt-parading, if by so doing we can lift a clever work of art into the category of the great!

## A DEGENERATE WORK OF ART

### BY AN UNKNOWN PAINTER

(See page 232)

LEAVING L'hermitte's picture which, to repeat, is a work showing the beginning of paint ping-ponging, let us consider another picture of "A Family," by an unknown "painter," in which the swish-swashing of a paint-brush back and forth in useless movement is pushed to an extreme. It is a full-blown specimen of the tendency to sacrifice everything to the pushing about of paint, see page 232.

Here we have a jewel of the "ping-ponging of paint over a badly designed canvas" such as our inquirer asks us to analyze. But having been able to find a photograph of one, is there really anything to analyze? The whole thing is so stupid

that it really needs no analysis. For where is there a single ray of clarity in the conception so that we can understand what it means? What is taking place? Is the woman washing an unwilling child's face or is she giving the child a beating? One can not tell. This is because the drawing is so bad one can make out the gestures neither of the mother nor of the boy. We do not know whether the woman is angry or whether the boy is weeping, bellowing or shouting. All is so misshapen and foggy and so indistinct that one can not tell whether the woman is Russian, Italian or American.

Not only is the conception trivial, the composition ugly, the drawing bad but the brushing in of



"SOME KIND OF A FAMILY"

A DEGENERATE WORK OF ART

BY AN UNKNOWN PAINTER

(See page 231)

the paint is equally meaningless and reveals nothing. So we are to assume that the artist had no higher aim than to cross-stroke, to ping-pong the paint over his canvas in this slap-dash manner, which, if you were to ask him, he would tell you is his "art," his "way" of painting. And what a way! Certainly not much better than the picture painted on the hill of Montmartre by the French donkey with a brush tied to his tail under the guidance of some jokers, one that made a sensation at the Salon of the Indépendants in 1910 and set all Paris giggling, one that is shown on page 103 of our May issue. It is a little better, but its trifling superiority is of no consequence. In fact, the picture painted by the ass "Boronali" with his tail is less offensive than this one painted by a human hand.

We contend that a man who will spend his time doing, exhibiting and selling such "color stunts" is not even half a man, he is a parasite, and the few who actually do buy them are misguided, unthinking people more to be pitied than to be punished.

Here is neither conception, composition nor anything but just paint-pushing back and forth, utterly meaningless, ugly and silly, the *ne plus ultra* of what we mean by "ping-ponging of paint over a badly designed canvas." To do such a thing and call it a sketch is well enough, but to show it in an exhibition and to eulogize it as a "work of art" is an æsthetic crime.

Here then we arrive at the abyss, where the painting of pictures ceases entirely and becomes mere "painting." Here we have no longer clever technique nor fine color-composition; and all that remains is a wild and idiotic pigment-pushing which requires no artistic invention, no imagination, no "sweating of blood" to draw properly, nor labor of any kind. We have a mere wart in paint, requiring nothing but a few flip fingers to produce, a monumental cheek to exhibit and a charlatanistic "gift of gab" to extol in order to bunco the bewildered and deluded public.

And to think that there should be so-called critics who publish such trivialities in paint and praise them in the press and in octavo tomes!